

The Stoic Philosophy

Gilbert Murray

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The Stoic Philosophy

Conway Memorial Lecture

Delivered at South Place Institute on
March 16, 1915

By

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CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS

[N the far-off, almost fabulous, Golden Age before the War, I once attended a lecture by our speaker of to-night, Professor Gilbert Murray. It was a most entertaining and instructive lecture; but what I chiefly learned on that occasion was a lesson I hope never to forget—as to the duties of a Chairman. Nothing would tempt me to reveal who the Chairman was: I will only say that I don't think he has ever figured, or ever will figure, on this platform. His speech was a conspicuous and masterly example

of how *not* to do it. He began by confessing that he knew nothing of Professor Murray's subject, but went on to explain that he had read it up for the occasion in an Encyclopædia; and thereupon he retailed at great length, and in a most lugubrious fashion, the information he had gleaned from that work of reference. There happened to be two or three anecdotes, manifestly the plums of the subject; and the Chairman must needs put in his thumb and pull out those plums, and spoil them for the lecturer by serving them up with consummate insipidity. What Professor Murray must have suffered in having his subject thus broken on the wheel, I shudder even now to think. His conduct was certainly a noble example of Stoicism. Had I been

in his place, I should infallibly have risen up and slain that Chairman, and claimed from a jury of my countrymen a verdict of "Served him right!"

The lesson of that occasion was burnt into my soul; so Professor Murray need not fear that I am going to pour out to you the stores of my erudition on the subject of the Stoics. No doubt, half an hour with the *Encyclopædia Britannica* would have supplied me with some capital anecdotes of Zeno, and Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius; but I have sternly averted my face from temptation. The ideal Chairman, as I conceive him, ought to emulate as nearly as possible the ideal child—who is "seen but not heard." If I fall away from that ideal, it is only to express my belief that there is no man in

England whom Moncure Conway, were he alive, would more warmly welcome to this platform than our speaker of tonight. His presence here is a proof that that large-minded humanism for which Conway stood and strove is making extraordinary progress even in our apparently slow-moving England. For Professor Murray, as you all know, is not a biologist, not a physicist, not a chemist. He has not pursued any of those studies of cause and effect which were supposed, in the Victorian era, to lead to perilous enlightenment—and did, in fact, lead to enlightenment, whether perilous or not. He is not even a mathematician, hardened in the audacious heresy that two and two make four. No, his life-work has lain among those *literæ humani-*

ores which have so often been associated, in the past, with violent Toryism in politics and dense obscurantism in thought. He does not come to us from godless London University, nor even from Cambridge with its mildly Whiggish proclivities. He is a son, and a very loyal son, of Oxford; but he has known how to absorb the best of her culture—if I may use a somewhat discredited word—without drinking in either her prejudices or her snobbishnesses or her cowardices. I suppose we may take Matthew Arnold as a type of Oxford enlightenment in the last generation, and I am far from undervaluing his work or his influence; but imagine Matthew Arnold coming down to address us here to-night! Or think of Pater! Think of

the vague and vaporous æsthetic paganism which was all that Pater could extract from the spiritual sustenance offered him by Oxford! Professor Murray, as we know, occupies one of the greatest positions in English scholarship; but while he is eminently a scholar among scholars, he is pre-eminently a man among men. His imagination and insight, working upon a solid basis of knowledge, give him an extraordinary power—as no doubt he will show you to-night—of revivifying Greek thought and experience, and making it human and real to us. Ancient Greece is not, to him, a picturesque phenomenon to be contemplated under a glass case, but an absorbing chapter in the story of humanity, full of vital meanings for the present and for the

future. What has specially attracted him to Euripides, we may be sure, is, in the last analysis, neither his lyric splendour nor his dramatic subtlety, but his daring rationalism and his passionate resentment of the stupidities and cruelties which are summed up in the phrase "man's inhumanity to man." These cruelties, these stupidities, are always with us, more or less, and are, as we know to our cost, liable to frightful recrudescences. No one is more resolute in combating them than Professor Murray. He is one of our foremost champions of reason and humanity. I am sure that Moncure Conway would warmly have appreciated the consistency, the sincerity, and the courage of his intellectual attitude, and would especially have

welcomed it as a product of modern Oxford.

For Professor Murray does not stand alone. He is one of a group of scholars, his contemporaries and his juniors, who are converting Oxford from a home of lost causes into a Great Headquarters for causes yet to be won. Is it not a most encouraging sign of the times that that admirable series, the Home University Library, should be edited by two New College dons, Professor Murray and Mr. Herbert Fisher, now Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University? What would Moncure Conway have said if any one had predicted that, within seven years of his death, such a book as Professor Bury's *History of Freedom of Thought* would be written by the Regius Professor of

History at Cambridge, and published under the editorship of the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford? I think he would have said, "No, no; the world does not move so quickly as that!" But it does move; it has moved; and I am optimist enough to hope that the present outburst of colossal unreason, alleged to be under the patronage of God, may in the end promote the cause of reason, or at any rate may not involve any intellectual setback. With that hope in view, let us not cease to fight the good fight of spiritual illumination.

I now call upon Professor Murray.

The Stoic Philosophy

I FEEL a peculiar pleasure in being asked to give this address in commemoration of Moncure D. Conway. I knew Mr. Conway but slightly. But when I was a boy and struggling with religious difficulties his books were among those which brought me both comfort and liberation. And all those who in our generation are stirred either by their doubts or their convictions to a consciousness of duties not yet stamped by the approval of their community, may well recognize him as one of their guiding beacons. His character is written large

in the history of his life. Few men of our time have been put so clearly to the test and so unhesitatingly sacrificed their worldly interests to their consciences. This strain of heroic quality, which lay beneath Mr. Conway's unpretentious kindness and easy humour, makes, I think, the subject of my address this evening not inappropriate to his memory.

✓ I wish in this lecture to give in rough outline some account of the greatest system of organized thought which the mind of man had built up for itself in the Græco-Roman world before the coming of Christianity with its inspired book and its authoritative revelation. ✕ Stoicism may be called either a philosophy or

a religion. It was a religion in its exalted passion; it was a philosophy inasmuch as it made no pretence to magical powers or supernatural knowledge. I do not suggest that it is a perfect system, with no errors of fact and no inconsistencies of theory. It is certainly not that; and I do not know of any system that is. But I believe that it represents a way of looking at the world and the practical problems of life which possesses still a permanent interest for the human race, and a permanent power of inspiration. I shall approach it, therefore, rather as a psychologist than as a philosopher or historian. I shall not attempt to trace the growth or variation of Stoic doctrine under its various professors, nor yet to scrutinize the logical validity of its arguments. I

shall merely try as best I can to make intelligible its great central principles and the almost irresistible appeal which they made to so many of the best minds of antiquity.

From this point of view I will begin by a very rough general suggestion—viz., that the religions known to history fall into two broad classes, religions which are suited for times of good government and religions which are suited for times of bad government; religions for prosperity or for adversity, religions which accept the world or which defy the world, which place their hopes in the betterment of human life on this earth or which look away from it as from a vale of tears. By “the world” in this connection I mean the ordinary concrete world, the well-

known companion of the flesh and the Devil; not the universe. For some of the religions which think most meanly of the world they know have a profound admiration for all, or nearly all, those parts of the universe where they have not been. ✓

Now, to be really successful in the struggle for existence, a religion must suit both sets of circumstances. A religion which fails in adversity, which deserts you just when the world deserts you, would be a very poor affair; on the other hand, it is almost equally fatal for a religion to collapse as soon as it is successful. Stoicism, like Christianity, was primarily a religion for the oppressed, a religion of defence and defiance; but, like Christianity, it had the requisite power }

of adaptation. Consistently or inconsistently, it opened its wings to embrace the needs both of success and of failure. To illustrate what I mean—contrast for a moment the life of an active, practical, philanthropic, modern Bishop with that of an anchorite like St. Simeon Stylites, living in idleness and filth on the top of a large column; or, again, contrast the Bishop's ideals with those of the author of the Apocalypse, abandoning himself to visions of a gorgeous reversal of the order of this evil world and the bloody revenges of the blessed. All three are devout Christians; but the Bishop is working with the world of men, seeking its welfare and helping its practical needs; the other two are rejecting or cursing it. In somewhat the same way we shall find

that our two chief preachers of Stoicism are, the one a lame and penniless slave to whom worldly success is as nothing, the other an Emperor of Rome, keenly interested in good administration.

The founder of the Stoic school, Zeno, came from Cilicia to Athens about the year 320 B.C. His place of birth is, perhaps, significant. He was a Semite, and came from the East. The Semite was apt in his religion to be fierier and more uncompromising than the Greek. The time of his coming is certainly significant. ✓ It was a time when landmarks had collapsed, and human life was left, as it seemed, without a guide. ✕ The average man in Greece of the fifth century B.C. had two main guides and sanctions for his conduct of life: the wel-

fare of his City and the laws and traditions of his ancestors. First the City, and next the traditional religion; and in the fourth century both of these had fallen. Let us see how.

Devotion to the City or Community produced a religion of public service. The City represented a high ideal, and it represented supreme power. By 320 B.C. the supreme power had been overthrown. Athens, and all independent Greek cities, had fallen before the overwhelming force of the great military monarchies of Alexander and his generals. The high ideal at the same time was seen to be narrow. The community to which a man should devote himself, if he should devote himself at all, must surely be something larger than one of these walled

cities set upon their separate hills. Thus the City, as a guide of life, had proved wanting. Now when the Jews lost their Holy City they had still, or believed that they had still, a guide left. "Zion is taken from us," says the Book of Esdras; "nothing is left save the Holy One and His Law." But Greece had no such Law. The Greek religious tradition had long since been riddled with criticism. It would not bear thinking out, and the Greeks liked to think things out. The traditional religion fell not because the people were degenerate. Quite the contrary; it fell, as it has sometimes fallen elsewhere, because the people were progressive. The people had advanced, and the traditional religion had not kept pace with them. And we may add another

consideration. If the Gods of tradition had proved themselves capable of protecting their worshippers, doubtless their many moral and intellectual deficiencies might have been overlooked. But they had not. They had proved no match for Alexander and the Macedonian phalanx.

Thus the work that lay before the generation of 320 B.C. was twofold. They had to rebuild a new public spirit, devoted not to the City, but to something greater; and they had to rebuild a religion or philosophy which should be a safe guide in the threatening chaos. We will see how Zeno girded himself to this task.

Two questions lay before him—how to live and what to believe. His real

interest was in the first, but it could not be answered without first facing the second. For if we do not in the least know what is true or untrue, real or unreal, we cannot form any reliable rules about conduct or anything else. And, as it happened, the Sceptical school of philosophy, largely helped by Plato, had lately been active in denying the possibility of human knowledge and throwing doubt on the very existence of reality. Their arguments were extraordinarily good, and many of them have not been answered yet; they affect both the credibility of the senses and the supposed laws of reasoning. The Sceptics showed how the senses are notoriously fallible and contradictory, and how the laws of reasoning lead by equally correct pro-

cesses to opposite conclusions. Many modern philosophers, from Kant to Dr. Schiller and Mr. Bertrand Russell, have followed respectfully in their footsteps. But Zeno had no patience with this sort of thing. He wanted to get to business.

Also he was a born fighter. His dealings with opponents who argued against him always remind me of a story told of the Duke of Wellington when his word was doubted by a subaltern. The Duke, when he was very old and incredibly distinguished, was telling how once, at mess in the Peninsula, his servant had opened a bottle of port, and inside found a rat. "It must have been a very large bottle," remarked the subaltern. The Duke fixed him with his eye. "It was a damned small bottle." "Oh," said the

subaltern, abashed; "then no doubt it was a very small rat." "It was a damned large rat," said the Duke. And there the matter has rested ever since.

✓ Zeno began by asserting the existence of the real world. "What do you mean by real?" asked the Sceptic. "I mean solid and material. I mean that this table is solid matter." "And God," said the Sceptic, "and the soul? Are they solid matter?" "Perfectly solid," says Zeno; "more solid, if anything, than the table." "And virtue or justice or the Rule of Three; also solid matter?" "Of course," said Zeno; "quite solid." This is what may be called "high doctrine," and Zeno's successors eventually explained that their master did not really mean that justice was solid matter, but

that it was a sort of "tension," or mutual relation, among material objects. This amendment saves the whole situation. But it is well to remember the uncompromising materialism from which the Stoic system started. †

Now we can get a step further. If the world is real, how do we know about it? By the evidence of our senses; for the sense-impression (here Stoics and Epicureans both followed the fifth-century physicists) is simply the imprint of the real thing upon our mind-stuff. As such it must be true. In the few exceptional cases where we say that "our senses deceive us" we speak incorrectly. The sense-impression was all right; it is we who have interpreted it wrongly, or received it in some incomplete way. ✓ What

we need in each case is a "comprehensive sense-impression." The meaning of this phrase is not quite clear. I think it means a sense-impression which "grasps" its object; but it may be one which "grasps" us, or which we "grasp," so that we cannot doubt it. In any case, when we get the real imprint of the object upon our senses, then this imprint is of necessity true. When the Sceptics talk about a conjuror making "our senses deceive us," or when they object that a straight stick put half under water looks as if it were bent in the middle, they are talking inexactly. In such cases the impression is perfectly true; it is the interpretation that may go wrong. Similarly, when they argue that reasoning is fallacious because men habitually make

mistakes in it, they are confusing the laws of reasoning with the inexact use which people make of them. You might just as well say that twice two is not four, or that 7×7 is not 49, because people often make mistakes in doing arithmetic.

Thus we obtain a world which is in the first place real and in the second knowable. Now we can get to work on our real philosophy, our doctrine of ethics and conduct. And we build it upon a very simple principle, laid down first by Zeno's master, Crates, the founder of the Cynic School: the principle that Nothing but Goodness is Good. That seems plain enough, and harmless enough; and so does its corollary: "Nothing but badness is bad." In the case of any concrete object which you call "good," it seems

quite clear that it is only good because of some goodness in it. We, perhaps, should not express the matter in quite this way, but we should scarcely think it worth while to object if Zeno chooses to phrase it so, especially as the statement itself seems little better than a truism.

Now, to an ancient Greek the form of the phrase was quite familiar. He was accustomed to asking, "What is the good?" It was to him the central problem of conduct. It meant: "What is the object of life, or the element in things which makes them worth having?" Thus the principle will mean: "Nothing is worth living for except goodness." The only good for man is to be good. And, as we might expect, when Zeno says "good" he means good in an ultimate

Day-of-Judgment sense, and will take no half-measures. The principle turns out to be not nearly so harmless as it looked. It begins by making a clean sweep of the ordinary conventions. You remember the eighteenth-century lady's epitaph which ends: "Bland, passionate, and deeply religious, she was second cousin to the Earl of Leitrim, and of such is the kingdom of heaven." One doubts whether, when the critical moment came, her relationships would really prove as important as her executors hoped; and it is the same with all the conventional goods of the world when brought before the bar of Zeno. Rank, riches, social distinction, health, pleasure, barriers of race or nation—what will those things matter before the tribunal of ultimate

truth? Not a jot. Nothing but goodness is good. It is what you are that matters—what you yourself are; and all these things are not you. They are external; they depend not on you alone, but on other people. The thing that really matters depends on you, and on none but you. From this there flows a very important and surprising conclusion. You possess already, if you only knew it, all that is worth desiring. The good is yours if you but will it. You need fear nothing. You are safe, inviolable, utterly free. A wicked man or an accident can cause you pain, break your leg, make you ill; but no earthly power can make you good or bad except yourself, and to be good or bad is the only thing that matters.

At this point common sense rebels. The plain man says to Zeno: "This is all very well; but we know as a matter of fact that such things as health, pleasure, long life, fame, etc., are good; we all like them. The reverse are bad; we hate and avoid them. All sane, healthy people agree in judging so." Zeno's answer is interesting. In the first place, he says: "Yes; that is what most people say. But the judges who give that judgment are bribed. Pleasure, though not really good, has just that particular power of bribing the judges, and making them on each occasion say or believe that she is good. The Assyrian king Sardanapalus thinks it good to stay in his harem, feasting and merry-making, rather than suffer hardship in governing his kingdom. He

swears his pleasure is good; but what will any unbribed third person say? Consider the judgments of history. Do you ever find that history praises a man because he was healthy, or long-lived, or because he enjoyed himself a great deal? History never thinks of such things; they are valueless and disappear from the world's memory. The thing that lives is a man's goodness, his great deeds, his virtue, or his heroism."

If the questioner was not quite satisfied, Zeno used another argument. He would bid him answer honestly for himself: "Would you yourself really like to be rich and corrupted? To have abundance of pleasure and be a worse man?" And, apparently, when Zeno's eyes were upon you, it was difficult to

say you would. Some Stoics took a particular instance. √When Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the liberators of Athens, slew the tyrant Hipparchus (which is always taken as a praiseworthy act), the tyrant's friends seized a certain young girl, named Leaina, who was the mistress of Aristogeiton, and tortured her to make her divulge the names of the conspirators. And under the torture the girl bit out her tongue and died without speaking a word. Now, in her previous life we may assume that Leaina had had a good deal of gaiety. Which would you sooner have as your own—the early life of Leaina, which was full of pleasures, or the last hours of Leaina, which were full of agony? And with a Stoic's eyes upon them, as before, people found it hard to

say the first. They yielded their arms and confessed that goodness, and not any kind of pleasure, is the good. †

But now comes an important question, and the answer to it, I will venture to suggest, just redeems Stoicism from the danger of becoming one of those inhuman cast-iron systems by which mankind may be browbeaten, but against which it secretly rebels. What is Goodness? What is this thing which is the only object worth living for?

Zeno seems to have been a little impatient of the question. We know quite well; everybody knows who is not blinded by passion or desire. Still, the school consented to analyze it. And the profound common sense and reasonableness

of average Greek thought expressed the answer in its own characteristic way.

✓ Let us see in practice what we mean by "good." Take a good bootmaker, a good father, a good musician, a good horse, a good chisel; you will find that each one of them has some function to perform, some special work to do; and a good one does the work well. Goodness is performing your function well. But when we say "well" we are still using the idea of goodness. What do we mean by doing it "well"? Here the Greek falls back on a scientific conception which had great influence in the fifth century B.C., and, somewhat transformed and differently named, has regained it in our own days. We call it "Evolution." The Greeks called it *Phusis*, a word which we

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translate by "Nature," but which seems to mean more exactly "growth," or "the process of growth."¹ It is Phusis which gradually shapes or tries to shape every living thing into a more perfect form. √ It shapes the seed, by infinite and exact gradations, into the oak; the blind puppy into the good hunting dog; the savage tribe into the civilized city. If you analyze this process, you find that Phusis is shaping each thing towards the fulfilment of its own function—that is, towards the good. Of course Phusis sometimes fails; some of the blind puppies die; some of the seeds never take root. Again, when proper development has been reached, it is generally

¹ See a paper by Professor J. L. Myres, "The Background of Greek Science," *University of California Chronicle*, xvi., 4.

followed by decay; that, too, seems like a failure in the work of Physis. I will not consider these objections now; they would take us too far afield, and we shall need a word about them later. Let us in the meantime accept this conception of a force very like that which most of us assume when we speak of evolution; especially, perhaps, it is like what Bergson calls *La Vie* or *L'Élan Vital* at the back of *L'Évolution Créatrice*, though to the Greeks it seemed still more personal and vivid; a force which is present in all the live world, and is always making things grow towards the fulfilment of their utmost capacity. We see now what goodness is; it is living or acting according to Physis, working with Physis in her eternal effort towards perfection. You

will notice, of course, that the phrase means a good deal more than we usually mean by living "according to nature."

It does not mean "living simply," or "living like the natural man." It means living according to the spirit which makes the world grow and progress.

This Physis becomes in Stoicism the centre of much speculation and much effort at imaginative understanding. It is at work everywhere. It is like a soul, or a life-force, running through all matter as the "soul" or life of a man runs through all his limbs. It is the soul of the world. Now, it so happened that in Zeno's time the natural sciences had made a great advance, especially Astronomy, Botany, and Natural History. This fact had made people familiar with the notion of

natural law. Law was a principle which ran through all the movements of what they called the *Kosmos*, or "ordered world." Thus *Phusis*, the life of the world, is, from another point of view, the Law of Nature; it is the great chain of causation by which all events occur; for the *Phusis* which shapes things towards their end acts always by the laws of causation. *Phusis* is not a sort of arbitrary personal goddess, upsetting the natural order; *Phusis* is the natural order, and nothing happens without a cause.

A natural law, yet a natural law which is alive, which is itself life. It becomes indistinguishable from a purpose, the purpose of the great world-process. It is like a foreseeing, forethinking power—*Pronoia*; our common word "Providence"

is the Latin translation of this *Pronoia*, though of course its meaning has been rubbed down and cheapened in the process of the ages. As a principle of providence or forethought it comes to be regarded as God, the nearest approach to a definite personal God which is admitted by the austere logic of Stoicism. And, since it must be in some sense material, it is made of the finest material there is; it is made of fire, not ordinary fire, but what they called intellectual fire. A fire which is present in a warm, live man, and not in a cold, dead man; a fire which has consciousness and life, and is not subject to decay. This fire, Phusis, God, is in all creation. ✓

We are led to a very definite and complete Pantheism. The Sceptic begins to

make his usual objections. "God in worms?" he asks. "God in fleas and dung beetles?" And, as usual, the objector is made to feel sorry that he spoke. "Why not?" the Stoic answers; "cannot an earthworm serve God? Do you suppose that it is only a general who is a good soldier? Cannot the lowest private or camp attendant fight his best and give his life for his cause? Happy are you if you are serving God, and carrying out the great purpose as truly as such-and-such an earthworm." That is the conception. All the world is working together. It is all one living whole, with one soul through it. And, as a matter of fact, no single part of it can either rejoice or suffer without all the rest being affected. The man who does not see that the good of

Stoic - Romantic

every living creature is his good, the hurt of every living creature his hurt, is one who wilfully makes himself a kind of outlaw or exile: he is blind, or a fool.

So we are led up to the great doctrine of the later Stoics, the *Συμπαθεία τῶν ὅλων*, or Sympathy of the Whole; a grand conception, the truth of which is illustrated in the ethical world by the feelings of good men, and in the world of natural science—we moderns may be excused for feeling a little surprise—by the fact that the stars twinkle. It is because they are so sorry for us: as well they may be!

Thus Goodness is acting, according to Phusis, in harmony with the will of God.

But here comes an obvious objection. If God is all, how can any one do other-

wise? God is the omnipresent Law; God is all Nature; no one can help being in harmony with Him. The answer is that God is in all except in the doings of bad men. For man is free. . . . How do we know that? Why, by a *katalpêtikê phantasia*, a comprehensive sense-impression which it is impossible to resist. Why it should be so we cannot tell. "God might have preferred chained slaves for his fellow-workers; but, as a matter of fact, he preferred free men." Man's soul, being actually a portion of the divine fire, has the same freedom that God himself has. He can act either with God or against him, though, of course, when he acts against him he will ultimately be overwhelmed. Thus Stoicism grapples with a diffi-

culty which no religion has satisfactorily solved.

You will have observed that by now we have worked out two quite different types of Stoic—one who defies the world and one who works with the world; and, as in Christianity, both types are equally orthodox. We have first the scorner of all earthly things. Nothing but goodness is good; nothing but badness bad. Pain, pleasure, health, sickness, human friendship and affection, are all indifferent. The truly wise man possesses his soul in peace; he communes with God. He always, with all his force, wills the will of God; thus everything that befalls him is a fulfilment of his own will and good. A type closely akin to

the early Christian ascetic or the Indian saint.

And in the second place we have the man who, while accepting the doctrine that only goodness is good, lays stress upon the definition of goodness. It is acting according to Phusis, in the spirit of that purpose or forethought which, though sometimes failing, is working always unrestingly for the good of the world, and which needs its fellow-workers. God is helping the whole world; you can only help a limited fraction of the world. But you can try to work in the same spirit. There were certain old Greek myths which told how Heracles and other heroes had passed laborious lives serving and helping humanity, and in the end became gods. The Stoics used such myths as

spirit
Aeneas
Virgil

allegories. That was the way to heaven; that was how a man may at the end of his life become not a dead body, but a star. In the magnificent phrase which Pliny translates from a Greek Stoic, God is that, and nothing but that; man's true God is the helping of man; *Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem.*

No wonder such a religion appealed to kings and statesmen and Roman governors. Nearly all the successors of Alexander—we may say all the principal kings in existence in the generations following Zeno—professed themselves Stoics. And the most famous of all Stoics, Marcus Aurelius, found his religion not only in meditation and religious exercises, but in working some sixteen hours a day for the

good practical government of the Roman Empire.

Is there any real contradiction or inconsistency between the two types of Stoic virtue? On the surface certainly there seems to be; and the school felt it, and tried in a very interesting way to meet it. The difficulty is this: what is the good of working for the welfare of humanity if such welfare is really worthless? Suppose, by great labour and skill, you succeed in reducing the death-rate of a plague-stricken area; suppose you make a starving countryside prosperous; what is the good of it all if health and riches are in themselves worthless, and not a whit better than disease and poverty? The answer is clear and uncompromising. A good bootmaker is one who

makes good boots; a good shepherd is one who keeps his sheep well; and even though good boots are, in the Day-of-Judgment sense, entirely worthless, and fat sheep no whit better than starved sheep, yet the good bootmaker or good shepherd must do his work well or he will cease to be good.⁴ To be good he must perform his function; and in performing that function there are certain things that he must "prefer" to others, even though they are not really "good." He must prefer a healthy sheep or a well-made boot to their opposites. It is thus that Nature, or Physis, herself works when she shapes the seed into the tree, or the blind puppy into the good hound. The perfection of the tree or hound is in itself indifferent, a thing of no ultimate

judgments

value. Yet the goodness of Nature lies in working for that perfection.

Life becomes, as the Stoics more than once tell us, like a play which is acted or a game played with counters. Viewed from outside, the counters are valueless; but to those engaged in the game their importance is paramount. What really and ultimately matters is that the game shall be played as it should be played. God, the eternal dramatist, has cast you for some part in His drama, and hands you the *rôle*. It may turn out that you are cast for a triumphant king; it may be for a slave who dies of torture. What does that matter to the good actor? He can play either part; his only business is to accept the *rôle* given him, and to perform it well.^x Similarly, life is a game of

counters. Your business is to play it in the right way. He who set the board may have given you many counters; he may have given you few. He may have arranged that, at a particular point in the game, most of your men shall be swept accidentally off the board. You will lose the game; but why should you mind that? It is your play that matters, not the score that you happen to make. ✓ He is not a fool to judge you by your mere success or failure. Success or failure is a thing He can determine without stirring a hand. It hardly interests Him. What interests Him is the one thing which He cannot determine—the action of your free and conscious will. †

This view is so sublime and so stirring

that at times it almost deadens one's power of criticism. Let us see how it works in a particular case. Suppose your friend is in sorrow or pain, what are you to do? In the first place, you may sympathize—since sympathy runs all through the universe, and if the stars sympathize surely you yourself may. And of course you must help. That is part of your function. Yet, all the time, while you are helping and sympathizing, are you not bound to remember that your friend's pain or sorrow does not really matter at all? He is quite mistaken in imagining that it does. Similarly, if a village in your district is threatened by a band of robbers, you will rush off with soldiers to save it; you will make every effort, you will give your life if necessary. But

suppose, after all, you arrive too late, and find the inhabitants with their throats cut and the village in ruins—why should you mind? You know it does not matter a straw whether the villagers' throats are cut or not cut; all that matters is how they behaved in the hour of death. Mr. Bevan, whose studies of the *Stoics and Sceptics* form a rare compound of delicate learning and historical imagination, says that the attitude of the Stoic in a case like this is like that of a messenger boy sent to deliver a parcel to someone, with instructions to try various addresses in order to find him. The good messenger boy will go duly to all the addresses, but if the addressee is not to be found at any of them what does that matter to the messenger boy? He has

done his duty, and the parcel itself has no interest for him. He may return and say he is sorry that the man cannot be found; but his sorrow is not heartfelt. It is only a polite pretence.

The comparison is a little hard on the Stoics. No doubt they are embarrassed at this point between the claims of high logic and of human feeling. But they meet the embarrassment bravely. "You will suffer in your friend's suffering," says Epictetus. "Of course you will suffer. I do not say that you must not even groan aloud. Yet in the centre of your being do not groan!" *"Εσωθεν μέντοι μὴ στενάξῃς."* It is very like the Christian doctrine of resignation. Man cannot but suffer for his fellow-man; yet a Christian is told to accept the will of

God and believe that ultimately, in some way which he does not see, the Judge of the World has done right.

Finally, what is to be the end after this life of Stoic virtue? Many religions, after basing their whole theory of conduct on stern duty and self-sacrifice and contempt for pleasure, lapse into confessing the unreality of their professions by promising the faithful as a reward that they shall be uncommonly happy in the next world. It was not that they really disdained pleasure; it was only that they speculated for a higher rate of interest at a later date. Notably, Islam is open to that criticism, and so is a great deal of popular Christianity. Stoicism is not. It maintains its ideal unchanged.

You remember that we touched, in passing, the problem of decay. Nature shapes things towards their perfection, but she also lets them fall away after reaching a certain altitude. She fails constantly, though she reaches higher and higher success. In the end, said the Stoic—and he said it not very confidently, as a suggestion rather than a dogma—in the very end, perfection should be reached, and then there will be no falling back. All the world will have been wrought up to the level of the divine soul. That soul is Fire; and into that Fire we shall all be drawn, our separate existence and the dross of our earthly nature burnt utterly away. Then there will be no more decay or growth; no pleasure, no disturbance. It may be a moment of agony, but what

does agony matter? It will be ecstasy and triumph, the soul reaching its fiery union with God.

The doctrine, fine as it is, seems always to have been regarded as partly fanciful, and not accepted as an integral part of the Stoic creed. Indeed, many Stoics considered that if this Absorption in Fire should occur, it could not be final. For the essence of Goodness is to do something, to labour, to achieve some end; ^{no} and if Goodness is to exist the world process must begin again. God, so to speak, cannot be good unless He is striving and helping. Phusis must be moving upward, or else it is not Phusis. *whole.*

Thus Stoicism, whatever its weaknesses, fulfilled the two main demands

that man ^{a)} makes upon his religion: it gave him armour when the world was predominantly evil, and ^{b)} it encouraged him forward when the world was predominantly good. It afforded guidance both for the saint and the public servant. And in developing this twofold character I think it was not influenced by mere inconstancy. It was trying to meet the actual truth of the situation. For in most systems it seems to be recognized that in the Good Life there is both an element of outward striving and an element of inward peace. There are things which we must try to attain, yet it is not really the attainment that matters; it is the seeking. And, ^{end} consequently, in some sense, the real victory is with him who fought best, not with the man who happened to win. For

beyond all the accidents of war, beyond the noise of armies and groans of the dying, there is the presence of some eternal friend. It is our relation to Him that matters.

A Friend behind phenomena—I owe the phrase to Mr. Bevan. It is the assumption which all religions make, and sooner or later all philosophies. The main criticism which I should be inclined to pass on Stoicism would lie here. Starting out with every intention of facing the problem of the world by hard thought and observation, resolutely excluding all appeal to tradition and mere mythology, it ends by making this tremendous assumption, that there is a beneficent purpose in the world and that the force which moves nature is akin to ourselves.

dynamic force

If we once grant that postulate, the details of the system fall easily into place. There may be some overstatement about the worthlessness of pleasure and worldly goods; though, after all, if there is a single great purpose in the universe, and that purpose good, I think we must admit that, in comparison with it, the happiness of any individual at this moment dwindles into utter insignificance. The good, and not any pleasure or happiness, is what matters. If there is no such purpose, well, then the problem must all be stated afresh from the beginning.

A second criticism, which is passed by modern psychologists on the Stoic system, is more searching but not so dangerous. The language of Stoicism, as of all ancient philosophy, was based on a rather crude

psychology. It was over-intellectualized. It paid too much attention to fully conscious and rational processes, and too little attention to the enormously larger part of human conduct which is below the level of consciousness. It saw life too much as a series of separate mental acts, and not sufficiently as a continuous, ever-changing stream. Yet a very little correction of statement is all that it needs.

Stoicism does not really make reason into a motive force. It explains that an "impulse," or *ὁρμή*, of physical or biological origin rises in the mind prompting to some action, and then Reason gives or withholds its assent (*συγκατάθεσις*). There is nothing seriously wrong here.

Other criticisms, based on the unreality of the ideal Wise Man, who acts without

desire and makes no errors, seem to me of smaller importance. They depend chiefly on certain idioms or habits of language, which, though not really exact, convey a fairly correct meaning to those accustomed to them.

But the assumption of the Eternal Purpose stands in a different category. However much refined away, it remains a vast assumption. We may discard what Professor William James used to call "Monarchical Deism" or our own claim to personal immortality. We may base ourselves on Evolution, whether of the Darwinian or the Bergsonian sort. But we do seem to find, not only in all religions, but in practically all philosophies, some belief that man is not quite alone in the universe, but is met in his

endeavours towards the good by some external help or sympathy. We find it everywhere in the unsophisticated man. We find it in the unguarded self-revelations of the most severe and conscientious Atheists. Now, the Stoics, like many other schools of thought, drew an argument from this consensus of all mankind. It was not an absolute proof of the existence of the Gods or Providence, but it was ^{p. 5.} a strong indication. The existence of a common instinctive belief in the mind of man gives at least a presumption that there must be a good cause for that belief.

This is a reasonable position. There must be some such cause. But it does not follow that the only valid cause is the truth of the content of the belief.

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I cannot help suspecting that this is precisely one of those points on which Stoicism, in company with almost all philosophy up to the present time, has gone astray through not sufficiently realizing its dependence on the human mind as a natural biological product. For it is very important in this matter to realize that the so-called belief is not really an intellectual judgment so much as a craving of the whole nature.

It is only of very late years that psychologists have begun to realize the enormous dominion of those forces in man of which he is normally unconscious. We cannot escape as easily as these brave men dreamed from the grip of the blind powers beneath the threshold. Indeed, as I see philosophy after philosophy

falling into this unproven belief in the Friend behind phenomena, as I find that I myself cannot, except for a moment and by an effort, refrain from making the same assumption, it seems to me that perhaps here too we are under the spell of a very old ineradicable instinct. We are gregarious animals; our ancestors have been such for countless ages. We cannot help looking out on the world as gregarious animals do; we see it in terms of humanity and of fellowship. Students of animals under domestication have shown us how the habits of a gregarious creature, taken away from his kind, are shaped in a thousand details by reference to the lost pack which is no longer there—the pack which a dog tries to smell his way back to all the time he is out walking,

the pack he calls to for help when danger threatens. It is a strange and touching thing, this eternal hunger of the gregarious animal for the herd of friends who are not there. And it may be, it may very possibly be, that, in the matter of this Friend behind phenomena, our own yearning and our own almost ineradicable instinctive conviction, since they are certainly not founded on either reason or observation, are in origin the groping of a lonely-souled gregarious animal to find its herd or its herd-leader in the great spaces between the stars.

At any rate, it is a belief very difficult to get rid of.

NOTE.—Without attempting a bibliography of Stoicism, I may mention the following books as likely to be useful to a student: (1) Original Stoic

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Literature. Epictetus, *Discourses*, etc.; translated by P. E. Matheson, Oxford, 1915. Marcus Aurelius, *To Himself*; translated by J. Jackson, Oxford, 1906. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, collected by Von Arnim, 1903-1905. (2) Modern Literature. *Roman Stoicism* (Cambridge, 1911), by E. V. Arnold; a very thorough and useful piece of work. *Stoics and Sceptics*, by Edwyn Bevan (Oxford, 1913); slighter, but illuminating. The doctrine of the things which are "preferred" (*προηγμένα*), though not "good," was, I think, first correctly explained by H. Gomperz, *Lebensauffassung der Griechischen Philosophie*, 1904. Professor Arnold's book contains a large bibliography.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

BIOGRAPHICAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES CONCERNING MONCURE DANIEL CONWAY

- 1832. Born in Virginia.
- 1850. *Free Schools in Virginia.*
- 1851. Enters Methodist Ministry.
- 1854. Enters Unitarian Ministry.
- 1858. Marries.
- 1863. Comes to England.
- 1864. Preaches at South Place Chapel.
- 1865. Appointed permanent Minister.
- 1869. Abandonment of prayer, followed by gradual abandonment of Theism.
- 1870. *The Earthward Pilgrimage.*
- 1874. *The Sacred Anthology.*
- 1877. *Idols and Ideals.*
- 1883. *Lessons for the Day* (2 vols.). (Revised edition, 1907.)

1884. Temporarily retires from South Place.
1892. Returns to South Place.
Life of Thomas Paine.
1897. Death of Mrs. Conway.
Final retirement from South Place.
1904. *Autobiography* (2 vols.).
1906. *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East.*
1907. Dies in Paris.
1909. *Moncure D. Conway : Addresses and Reprints.* (A Memorial volume containing a complete Bibliography.)
1910. First Memorial Lecture.
1911. Second Memorial Lecture.
1912. Third Memorial Lecture.
1913. Fourth Memorial Lecture.
1914. Fifth Memorial Lecture.
1915. Sixth Memorial Lecture.

APPENDIX B

THE CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURESHIP

AT a general meeting of the South Place Ethical Society, held on October 22, 1908, it was resolved, after full discussion, that an effort should be made to establish a series of lectures, to be printed and widely circulated, as a permanent Memorial to Dr. Conway.

Moncure Conway's untiring zeal for the emancipation of the human mind from the thralldom of obsolete or waning beliefs, his pleadings for sympathy with the oppressed and for a wider and profounder conception of human fraternity than the world has yet reached, claim, it is urged, an offering of gratitude more permanent than the eloquent obituary or reverential service of mourning.

The range of the lectures (of which the sixth is published herewith) must be regulated by the

financial support accorded to the scheme; but it is hoped that sufficient funds will be forthcoming for the endowment of periodical lectures by distinguished public men, to further the cause of social, political, and religious freedom, with which Dr. Conway's name must ever be associated.

The Committee, although not yet in possession of the necessary capital for the permanent endowment of the Lectureship, thought it better to inaugurate the work rather than to wait for further contributions. The funds in hand, together with those which may reasonably be expected in the immediate future, will ensure the delivery of an annual lecture for some years at least.

The Committee earnestly appeal either for donations or subscriptions from year to year until the Memorial is permanently established. Contributions may be forwarded to the Hon. Treasurer.

On behalf of the Executive Committee:—

W. C. COUPLAND, M.A., *Chairman*.

(Mrs.) C. FLETCHER SMITH and E. J. FAIRHALL, *Hon. Secretaries*.

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